DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 388 106 FL 023 382

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TITLE	A Modular Training Framework: An Appropriate Response to the Issues of Relevance and Home Environment Application in a Teacher Education Project?
PUB DATE	Apr 95
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Language in Development: The Stakeholders' Perspectives (2nd, Denpasar, Bali, April 12-15, 1995).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Curriculum Design; Curriculum Development; Developing Nations; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Language Teachers; *Relevance (Education); *Teacher Education; *Teacher Educator Education
IDENTIFIERS	Edith Cowan University (Australia); *Laos

ABSTRACT

A project designed to train teachers of English in Laos, sponsored by the Australia Agency for International Development (AusAID) through the English Language Training Project (ELTP) and more recently through the Laos English Language Project (LELP), is described. The project has two main components: development of a modular English language curriculum and grants for study of curriculum development and teacher training at Edith Cowan University (Australia). The report outlines the origins of the project, areas of concern in training foreign English teachers, rationale for the design of the projects' components, and the content of the training framework design. Considerations in making the curricula applicable to the home environment (Laos) and sustaining support to the trainees after their return to Laos are also examined. Contains eight references. (MSE)

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ED 388 106

A MODULAR TRAINING FRAMEWORK; AN APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO THE ISSUES OF RELEVANCE AND HOME ENVIRONMENT APPLICATION IN A TEACHER EDUCATION PROJECT?

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ABSTRACT

The government of Lao PDR. (GOL) has set a high priority on the development of English language proficiency in Laos. There have been, however, severe constraints to the implementation of this; in particular the lack of English language curricula in schools and the Teachers' Training College (Dong Dok) and a lack of common and appropriate instructional materials. The Australia Agency for International Development (AusAID), formerly AIDAB, has provided support for these needs through the English Language Training Project (ELTP) and more recently through the Laos English Language Project (LELP).

Edith Cowan University was involved as a training provider for in-Australia aspects of the (ELTP) project. A modular training framework was utilised to facilitate the work and the initial part of the paper backgrounds the project and then addresses reasons for the adoption of this approach. Issues such as program design and budgeting, continuing language support, enhancement of language development in professional training environments and considerations of flexibility will be examined. Discussion and illustration of program components within the context of the Modular Training Framework Model will be undertaken and issues of relevance and home environment application will be examined. The relationship of these two concerns to training and development and to notions of collaborative development and sustainability concludes the paper.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Since the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986 the Government of Lao PDR has placed a high priority on the development of English language proficiency in Laos and has recognised the importance of the language as a means of communication both within the South East Asian region and internationally. As part of this process the Government of Lao PDR has looked to Australia as an important English language aid provider to take a lead in English language projects both in-country and off-shore.

Australia has been involved with Laos as an aid provider since 1975 when the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was proclaimed. Recent involvement has been dominated by the Mekong River Bridge project (Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge) but English language projects have enjoyed high priority and considerable significance.

The immediately relevant background to the project to be discussed in this paper involves the following. A Strategy and Project Identification Mission from Australia visited Laos in 1992 to identify potential projects in English Language Training (ELT) consistent with the (then current) needs and priorities of both the Laotian and Australian governments. The strategy developed as a result of that mission, which became known as the English Language Training Project (ELTP), supported continued Australian ELT assistance to Laos in three phases: Preparatory (1992-June 1994), Implementation (July 1994-June 1997), Development (July 1997-1999). Subsequently the second two phases of this strategy have been revised and incorporated into the Laos English Language Project (LELP) which is intended to provide continuity for several discreet Australian Agency for International Development English language initiatives under one coordinated management structure. This project (LELP) is scheduled to commence this year (in 1995) and to run for a period of four years.

The involvement of Edith Cowan University has been with two strands of the English Language Training Project (ELTP): the English Language Curriculum Project and the English Language Training Project Awardee Scheme. Initial association with the Project (ELTP) developed from an AusAID request to provide specifications for a practice-oriented training course which incorporated significant components of English language support and enhancement and which catered for the special needs of the recipient group.

TRAINING FRAMEWORK DESIGN: ISSUES

The elements that were to be included in the specifications requested by AusAID (a practice orientation, EL support and enhancement, special needs) deserve some comment. In a recently published report Davies & Hase (1995) concluded that most of the problems associated with cooperative educational ventures arose from the fact that the dominant language and concepts which inform the ventures reflect older paradigms of education and training. Bureaucratic impediments, entrenched academic attitudes, a lack of flexibility in course design and delivery and an unresponsiveness to recipient needs were all cited as reasons for unsuccessful and inappropriate course provision. The request from AusAID to provide specifications for an appropriate course for Lao ELTP awardees was made with the stipulation that impediments such as those identified by Davies and Hase be obviated. Further, this request was informed by feedback the (then) AusAID field officer, stationed in Vientiane, had received from Lao awardees returning from study in Australia.

In her recent Doctoral study Ursula Nixon (1994) shows that areas of concern for overseas TESOL teachers studying in Australia include, in particular, issues of cultural sensitivity. Most apprehension centred around two questions: the application of teaching techniques to inappropriate and unsuitable home environments and the imposition of the demands of Western education. Nixon's study also identifies where respondents felt their expectations were not being adequately catered for in TESOL courses: attention to respondents' macro skills (LSRW), development of teaching skills, use of technology suitable for the home environment, cultural studies.

The design of TESOL courses has been a neglected area of research. This circumstance, noted by Bernhardt and Hammadou (1987), has resulted in provision of such courses being conducted largely on intuition and/or commonsense. If the feedback from the Lao awardees signified anything it was that intuition and commonsense were not always enough, or that they had been found wanting as planning tools as Davies and Hase have suggested. Nevertheless, it was with intuition and an expectation that commonsense would be a useful tool that the training framework design for the ELTP at Edith Cowan University was developed.

TRAINING FRAMEWORK DESIGN: APPLICATION

The issues which shaped the development work and therefore had a considerable bearing on the outcome were of two kinds: first, the structural aspects of design and second, the substance or content which would occupy those structural features. In the case of the design it was necessary to provide the funding agency (AusAID) with a clear course structure and associated budget costs for approval, to work within the financial and academic structures of the University but also to provide

sufficient flexibility to allow for variations in awardees' English language (EL) proficiency with potentially variable learning and acquisition pathways. The substance or content had to include continuous EL support (or at least the continuous potential for this) while at the same time incorporating substantial EL teaching training and development in a practice oriented environment and catering for the special needs of the recipients.

This requirement that the special needs of the recipient group be catered for was a little more complex than ensuring that the contents of the training and development addressed significant home environment issues. The awardees who studied at Edith Cowan University were, as already indicated, from two strands of the ELTP: The English Language Curriculum Project and The English Language Training Project Awardee Scheme. The special interests of awardees within these two strands included a group concerned with teacher training, one with curriculum development for the Matthayom (lower secondary) level, another with technical teacher training and a group concerned with upper secondary (Udom level) teaching. The initial group of awardees were Udom teachers, the teacher trainers and curriculum officers came in the second stage of the program. By good luck (intuition and commonsense perhaps) the nature of the framework design allowed the substitution of more pertinent content and the inclusion of more specifically appropriate modules to cater for the specific needs of the second group of awardees without changing the "shape"of the framework and thus confusing the University and the funding agency.

Such flexibility was especially useful for budgeting arrangements as both the funding agency and the University (fund management) were comfortable with the overall structure and not unduly concerned with costs of specific items of content. The four phase nature of the framework (*April -July, August-December, January-February, March-June*) was related to the time the awardees were in Australia, semester and inter-semester periods at Edith Cowan University and the availability of funding from AusAID. In particular the client-driven, modular structure of the programs identified them in University terms as **projects** which allowed a considerably greater measure of control over the budget revenue and permitted greater flexibility in employment and payment of specialist staff.

TRAINING FRAMEWORK DESIGN: RESPONSES

The programs under discussion were client-driven and organised in a way so as to endeavour to accommodate requests from the various stakeholders. The awardees' interests were substantially catered for by a sensitive and extremely perceptive AusAID field officer whose influence on the content modules in the framework design was considerable. Similarly the concerns of the Australian and Laotian Governments were, to a large extent, channelled through the field officer so the responses were informed by these concerns as well. The significance of this interpretative role cannot be underestimated. One of the great difficulties of providing appropriate training for clients from a

remote environment is getting a real sense of the needs, independent of the official government and agency views and more wholly informative than those likely to be offered by the awardees, particularly in early stages of training. The singularly useful Janus-like facility of being able to articulate the actual needs of the recipient group and relate those to a knowledge of what should be possible in the host environment is a rare quality in a field officer; the programs discussed in this paper benefited from this attribute. The results of these propitious circumstances are the four training programs (*Figures 1-3*) which exhibit the diversity of response and the accommodation of differing needs which the project required.

The programs developed for the Lao awardees which adopted the modular framework design were underpinned by continuous English language support and development. This support was provided through the Edith Cowan University English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) Centre which conducts a range of courses offering successively more challenging language work in preparation of students for entry to, and successful study in, University award courses. The modular framework allowed for shifts in emphasis as appropriate, beginning with intensive English language input at levels appropriate for each awardee and introducing the other specialist content modules through subsequent phases of the programs. The underpinning of the programs provided by the continuous involvement in ELICOS addressed the AusAID request for a training course which incorporated significant components of English language support and enhancement. It also ensured that a balance was negotiated between the input that the awardees were provided with through the ELICOS support in managed, systematically structured environments and the more demanding professional contexts of the specialist modules which demanded use and development of communicative competence.

The training program frameworks presented in *Figures 1-3* clearly illustrate the divergent needs of the awardees in the specialist modules of each program. The greatest commonalities exist between the Udom teachers' program (*Figure 1*) and that designed for the teacher trainers (*Figure 1*). These programs show most clearly the substantial extent of the English language (EL) support. The significance of the AusAID request for this component in the training programs is clearly illustrated by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores achieved by the awardees prior to departure to Australia. Overall scores ranged from 3.5 to 6.0 with some band scores as low as 2.5. Thus the preponderance of EL support in the April-July phase of each program and the continuation of this content module through the subsequent phases can be viewed as a response to both an official request and an imperative need. It might be thought of as a requirement for the enhancement of local autonomy (Darnell, 1979:11) for without the language development which the 1120 hours of EL instruction produced the value of the rest of the programs would have been eroded and little measure of independence would have been achieved.

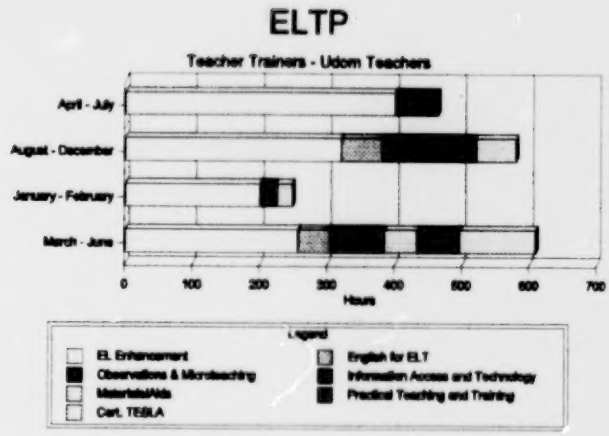

Figure 1

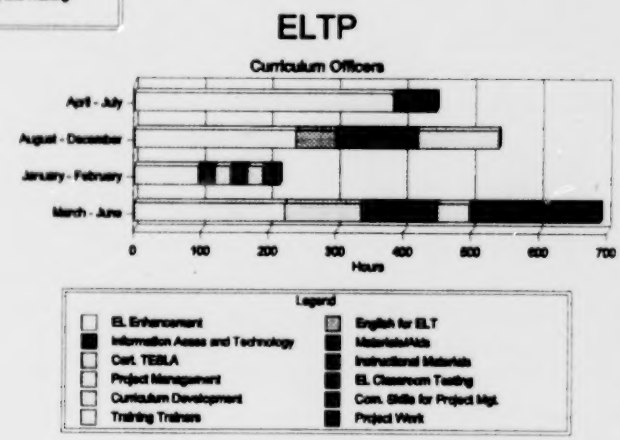

Figure 2

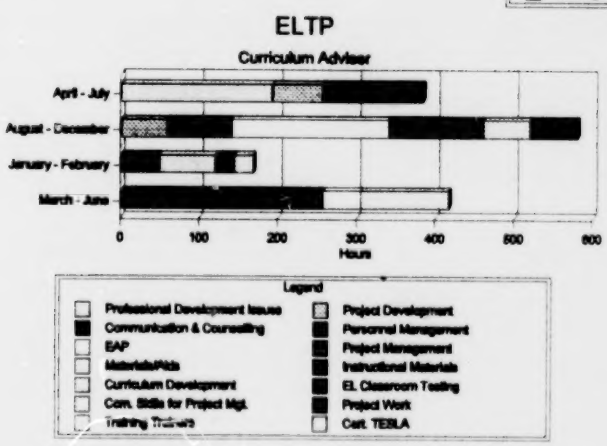

Figure 3

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TRAINING FRAMEWORK DESIGN: CONTENT

Comment has already been made on the capacity of the Edith Cowan University ELICOS courses to cater for differing levels and to provide varied learning and acquisition pathways. The teacher trainers and the curriculum officers studied at more advanced ELICOS levels in the EL modules of their programs than did the Udom teachers. Individual weaknesses in a macroskill (listening for instance) could be given special attention within the framework without requiring organisational or structural shifts. It was very much a case of providing freedom for the flexibility to make appropriate academic decisions without the necessity to make design changes. Then too, the Udom teachers' program and the teacher trainers' program were similar in structure and seemingly similar in content. Appearances and labels can be deceptive, in this instance they masked quite different content in terms of scope and difficulty levels. While the concerns of both the teacher trainers and the Udom teachers (*Figure 4*) were centred on the same broad issues the complexity and extent of those concerns differed, not only between the two groups but also among the teacher trainers. The technical teacher trainers had particular problems and interests which they wished to pursue, particularly in the three modules: LESSON OBSERVATIONS, MATERIALS/AIDS, PRACTICAL TEACHING. Again the training framework allowed these special needs to be catered for within the existing structure.

Many writers (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Breen, 1987) have drawn attention to the importance of staying in touch with the needs of learners throughout the changes that occur during a language program. Negotiating the responses to these changes with the learners themselves particularly in the latter stages of a course, when increased confidence and understanding on both sides is more likely to produce informed results, can strengthen a program and infuse it with highly pertinent issues.

UDOM TEACHERS
TEACHER TRAINERS

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ENHANCEMENT	ENGLISH FOR ELT
LESSON OBSERVATIONS	INFORMATION ACCESS AND
MATERIALS/AIDS	TECHNOLOGY
CERT TESLA	PRACTICAL TEACHING

Figure 4

In developing the training program for the English Language Curriculum Project considerably more negotiation and adaptation was necessary than for the teachers and the teacher trainers. To begin

with there were two strands to this project, the EL curriculum officers and the EL curriculum adviser and the training requirements of the two were seen as different both by AusAID and the Government of Laos. Then too, the backgrounds and experience of the participants within these strands were not as uniform as they tended to be with the awardees in the other training programs. Language levels (IELTS 4.0-6.0) differed quite considerably and the ultimate responsibilities of the two groups with regard to future work in Laos were dissimilar in some respects.

The results of the negotiation, development and adaptation process were the modular training programs for the curriculum officers (*Figure 2*) and for the curriculum adviser (*Figure 3*). Many components were common to both but discreet modules permitted specific focus within a program where this was seen as desirable. For instance the curriculum officers' program has a substantial and continued ELICOS, whereas the curriculum adviser had 180 hours of English for Academic purposes (EAP). These differences were negotiated in order to address one of the substantial disparities between the two groups (EL proficiency) and also to address the need the adviser identified, to develop language skills to cope with the demands of professional literature. The common and divergent aspects to these two programs can be clearly seen in *Figure 5*.

As part of the collaborative training development of the programs a schedule of regular meetings was instituted, organised initially by the curriculum adviser as part of her training application but increasingly devolved to apportion responsibility to the whole group. The purpose of these meetings was to review what had been accomplished, to discuss what had been planned and to negotiate modifications where necessary. On the whole this process worked extremely well so that from an early stage the exchange of perceptions and the negotiation of direction and content became a mutually beneficial experience. If anything the course providers were the beneficiaries in this process as our programs were decidedly strengthened as a result.

ISSUES OF RELEVANCE AND HOME ENVIRONMENT APPLICATION

The title of this paper is deliberately framed as a question and it is one to which the answer is perhaps not yet apparent. Some explanation of this comment is necessary. Thus far the concern of the paper has been to delineate the extent to which the programs in this project responded to the needs of the various stakeholders involved. An attempt has been made to show how the modular training framework was devised and used to contend with the issues involved with the project, the application and responses within the structure of the framework to those issues and the content

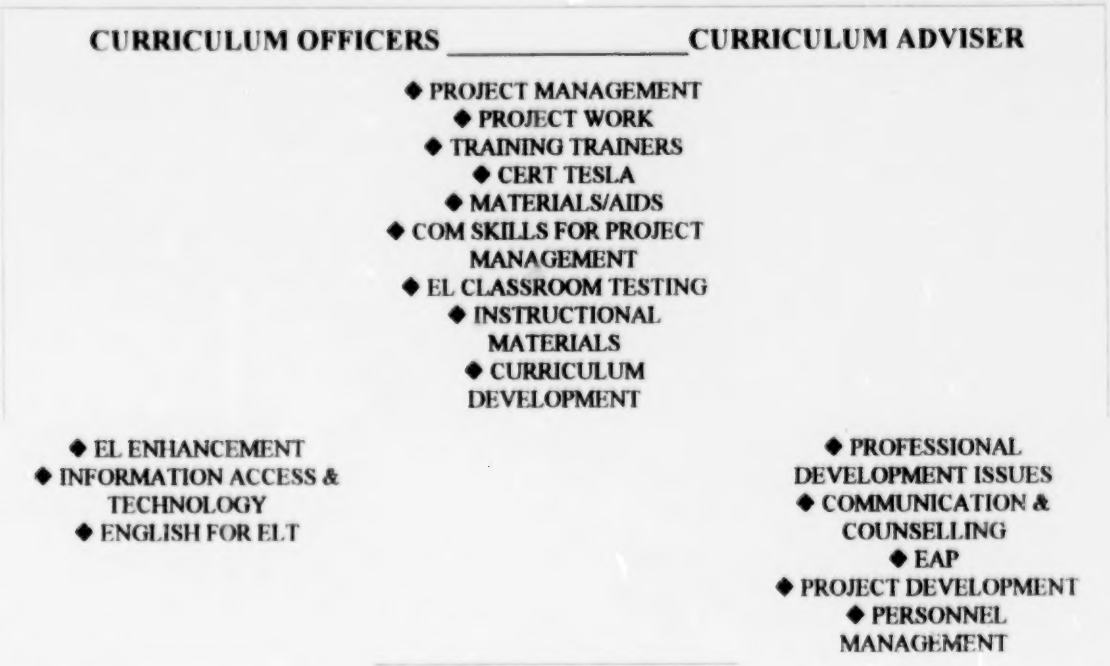

Figure 5

embedded in the modules within the training framework. Wenden (1993) reminds us that learning should be contextualised and interactive. The second of these two criteria was not difficult to cater for, but what of contextualisation? One of the Lao awardees wrote to the AusAID field officer three months after arriving in Perth and amongst the remarks had this to say "... *I'd like to say that you've put us on the right track here in Perth. We've found that Edith Cowan Uni, Claremont Campus like a paradise, we have the best...*" (1993). This doesn't sound like appropriate application for the home environment, but the issues are not as simple as to demand gearing everything to the situation at home. For one thing it is difficult to assess objectively or clearly the needs of any situation from embroilment within. There is a great deal to be gained from wholly experiencing alternatives and then determining subsequently how the home environment might be informed by these alternatives. In any case the home environment will certainly be shaped by the agendas of powerful interest groups and stakeholders and it is these which will largely determine the extent to which any alternatives are adopted.

It is important to remember in the case of this project that the original request from AusAID was particularly concerned with practical orientation, EL support and special needs. The issue of relevance to home environment rather than being stated explicitly was incorporated within the area of special needs. One of the significant advantages found with the modular training framework was that it permitted response to special needs as these emerged, or developed, and enabled providers to work increasingly with the awardees to "tailor" content of the modules to perceptions concerning the needs of the home environment. Was it an appropriate response? It is difficult to answer this question at this stage. The concern of the final section of this paper will be to endeavour to explain why this is the case.

COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT, TRAINING AND SUSTAINABILITY

In a project such as the one outlined in this paper an important issue is the clarity with which the providers perceive the issues their work is to address and the extent of their understanding of the relationship of their efforts to the overall venture. One of the reasons why it is difficult to determine whether the training and development described herein was appropriate or not is to be found in this issue. As is often the case in this sort of work the involvement of Edith Cowan University was a small but highly significant contribution to a large endeavour. The fact that our involvement has ceased makes a clear answer to the question posed in the title of this paper something which we may never really know.

In some senses the appropriateness of collaborative development and the prospect of sustainability can be said to emanate from continuity of involvement and the accumulation of experience and understanding which that implies. A lack of continuity, for instance, precludes building on the relationship of trust and mutual respect that often enhances language work in development projects. It also may prevent providers from conducting a thorough-going evaluation of their work in the contexts for which it was intended. Such is the case with this project, a further reason why it is impossible to give a definite answer to questions about the appropriateness of the response.

It is also important to realise, on the other hand, that out-of -country training doesn't necessarily promote sustainability, particularly as regards the personnel involved. Awardees who train overseas do, it is true, experience alternatives which may help them see the issues and problems at home more clearly, but the experience also changes them. While this process is going on changes are occurring at home so that the situation they return to is often quite different from that which they anticipate even allowing for their recognition of personal growth. Inevitable frustrations may result which do little to promote sustainability and providers continuing with, or taking up, phases of projects where this could occur often have to accept responsibility for dealing with the problem.

The final issue which deserves comment and which also contributes to the difficulty of providing an answer to the title question has to do with the manner of awarding projects such as the LELP by the Australian Aid Agency AusAID. In a climate where economic rationalism is the notion which shapes bureaucratic thinking management of finance becomes an all important issue. More important it would seem than experience gained in earlier aspects of the project, the quality of earlier provision or the belief that continuity of involvement could promote sustainability. The frustration is not so much that the Edith Cowan University tender was unsuccessful, because inevitably successful submissions will be subject to the same problems, but more that there will not be an opportunity to satisfactorily resolve the issue concerning the appropriateness of the modular training framework.

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